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DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431618791286

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-153534
Journal Article
Accepted Version

Originally published at:
Wagner, Lisa (2019). Good Character Is What We Look for in a Friend: Character Strengths Are Positively Related to Peer Acceptance and Friendship Quality in Early Adolescents. Journal of Early Adolescence, 39(6):864-903.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431618791286

Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents

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Bio Sketch

Lisa Wagner studied psychology at the University of Trier in Germany. Since 2012, she works as a Research and Teaching Assistant at the Department of Psychology at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. Her interests are in the areas or personality psychology, positive psychology, and psychological assessment. Her research focuses on character strengths, in particular in children and adolescents.

Abstract

This study investigates the role of character strengths in peer relationships among early adolescents. A sample of students (N = 339; mean age = 12.84 years, 53.1% female) nominated friends in the classroom and completed assessments of character strengths, the desirability and importance of character strengths in a friend, and friendship quality. Results indicate that the character strengths of honesty, humor, kindness, and fairness were most desirable and important in a friend. Perspective, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, and humor were associated with higher peer acceptance. Dyadic analyses of mutual best friends suggested that a number of character strengths were also positively related to friend-rated friendship quality. Overall, the results demonstrate the relevance of character strengths for positive peer relationships in adolescents.

Keywords: VIA-Youth, peer relationships, friendship, likeability, personality, character, adolescence, APIM

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Introduction

Having well-functioning and fulfilling relationships is seen as an indicator of flourishing (e.g., Seligman, 2011). Peer relationships, friendships in particular, also represent important contexts for children's and adolescents' social, emotional, and cognitive development (e.g., Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Berndt, 2002; Rubin et al., 2015). Research has shown their widespread influence on both physical and psychological well-being (e.g., Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015) and later maladaptive functioning and psychopathology (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2006). Different aspects of peer relations – being a member of a group, being accepted by one's peers, and having friends – have also been linked with school achievement and adjustment (e.g., Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997; Ryan, 2000; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). While the influence of peer relations on well-being is pervasive throughout the life span, both the time spent with peers and the importance of peers in one's social network seems to be peaking in early adolescence (see Parker et al., 2006).

Character has been associated with friendship in philosophical traditions for centuries (e.g., by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics), describing true friends as those who build character and true friendships as those in which friends value each other because of their character. At the beginning of this century, when character was re-conceptualized in psychology, friendship was even used to define character: "Good character is what we look for in a friend" (Park & Peterson, 2009, p. 1). Studying character strengths is increasingly recognized as vital, particularly in adolescence and in the school setting (e.g., Sokatch, 2017). The present study examines whether character strengths are indeed desired in a friend and how character strengths relate to peer acceptance, to the number of friends one has in the classroom, and to friendship quality.

Character strengths in the context of adolescents' peer relationships

Character strengths are described as traits that are inherently positively valued and contribute to a *good life* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA classification suggested by Peterson and Seligman (2004) includes 24 character strengths and six core virtues (wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence) that have been shown to be valued throughout different time periods and across different cultures (e.g., Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Character strengths are described as mechanisms that enable displaying the virtues in behavior. As such, character strengths are a subset of personality traits, i.e., those personality traits that are positively and morally valued. Like all personality traits, character strengths are relatively stable dispositions that are expressed in an individual's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Peterson & Seligman,

2004). The VIA classification of character strengths and virtues offers a comprehensive framework for studying good character and its relation to positive development. The present study is based on the theoretical framework of the VIA classification. In investigating the relationships of character strengths with peer acceptance and friendships, it tests the first criterion put forward by Peterson and Seligman (2004): "A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and others" (p. 17). Positive relationships to peers are seen as an important fulfillment, in particular in early adolescence. By testing the contributions of character strengths to friend-perceived friendship quality, this study is one of the first to also address the second part of the criterion, namely the contribution to the *good life of others*.

Research on the role of character strengths in adolescents' peer relationships has been scarce. Park and Peterson (2006) found teacher-rated perceived popularity to be positively related with leadership, fairness, self-regulation, prudence, and forgiveness, but to their surprise not with strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity, such as love, kindness, or social intelligence. Weber and Ruch (2012) focused on adolescents' romantic relationships and found that both males and females selected honesty, humor, love, kindness, and hope most frequently as character strengths that described an ideal partner. In addition, two studies suggested relationships between strengths such as humor, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, bravery, and fairness with teacher-rated social adjustment following school transitions (Shoshani & Aviv, 2012; Shoshani & Slone, 2013) and thus provided evidence that character strengths are relevant for social functioning in the classroom. The present study adds to existing research by studying the role of character strengths as individual characteristics in early adolescents' peer relationships, encompassing peer acceptance and friendships in the school setting.

Individual differences in peer relationships in early adolescence

Adolescents' individual characteristics influence the formation and maintenance of peer relationships, the quality of these relationships, as well as the effects they have on well-being (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). However, as noted by Wilson, Harris, and Vazire (2015), comparatively little is known about the determinants of individual differences in friendship satisfaction. One can also assume that friendships have different profiles on friendship functions, i.e., not all functions (e.g., intimacy, stimulating companionship) might be equally important for all friendships (see Grotpeter & Crick, 1996). Which of the friendship functions are more central in a friendship may depend on the friends' personality traits (e.g., Abbell, Brewer, Qualter, & Austin, 2016). Accordingly, it has been suggested that the way in which friendship influences development and adjustment is related to the adolescent's individual characteristics – as well as those of their friends (Rubin et al., 2015).

Several lines of research have focused on characteristics of children and adolescents that are well-liked or that are desired as friends by their peers, such as work on peer attraction (e.g., Bukowski, Sippola, & Newcomb, 2000) and peer-valued

characteristics (e.g., Vaillancourt & Hymel, 2006). However, these approaches mostly used very broad dimensions – such as "class competence", which included both being smart and helping everyone (Bukowski et al., 2000) – or typically only focused on the sum score of peer-valued characteristics, such as physical attractiveness or being good at sport, which were typically also assessed using the same method as the outcomes (peer nominations). Overall, most research on individual differences in peer relationships focused on the influences of attachment history, aggressive and antisocial behavior, and peer victimization (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011), and little is known about the role of personality traits. One exception is a study by Jensen-Campbell et al. (2002) showing a link of agreeableness and extraversion with peer acceptance and number of friends. In addition to the Big Five personality dimensions, positively valued traits, such as character strengths, could be particularly relevant in friendships. The link between character and friendship was already established by Aristotle, yet to the best of the author's knowledge character has never been studied empirically in the context of friendships.

There is a vast amount of research showing that the absence of positive peer relationships negatively impacts later psychological adjustment (e.g., reviewed in Parker et al., 2006), and research has generally focused on identifying those aspects of peer relationships that represent risk factors for problematic outcomes (Rubin et al., 2015). The present study takes a positive psychological perspective on friendships in adolescence by investigating how positive personality traits – i.e., character strengths – relate to different positive features of peer relationships in the classroom. When studying individual differences in children's and adolescents' experiences with peers, most research has addressed a) status in the peer group (acceptance or rejection), b) quantity of friendships, and c) quality of friendships (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). The present study focused on three research questions relating to all of these topics:

(1) Which qualities are desired in an ideal friend?

(2) How do character strengths relate to being liked (peer acceptance) and having friends in the classroom?

(3) How do character strengths relate to friendship quality?

Question 1: Which qualities are desired in an ideal friend?

Large-scale surveys like the General Social Survey (Smith, Hout, & Marsden, 2015) have included questions about desirable (i.e., what one wishes for in a friend) and important (i.e., what one considers most necessary) qualities in friends. The results revealed that *honesty* was consistently rated as the most desirable and important quality in friends while qualities such as *responsible* and *fun-loving* were also considered very important. Sprecher and Regan (2002) presented their participants with a more extensive list of traits, which was adapted from research on partner preferences, and found *sense of humor* to receive the highest ratings for desirability and importance in a same-sex friend. Expressiveness and openness, warmth and kindness, an

exciting personality, and similarities on interests and leisure activities were further qualities considered highly desirable and important in same-sex friends – they did, however, not include traits such as honesty or trustworthiness. The studies by Cottrell, Neuberg, and Li (2007) have underlined the special role of *trustworthiness*, which was defined to include *honesty, dependability,* and *loyalty.* As for what we look for in close friends, Cottrell et al. (2007) found that besides trustworthiness, *trustingness*, *extraversion*, *humor, compassion, tolerance, agreeableness, respectfulness, emotional stability, cooperativeness, judgment,* and *ambition* received higher importance ratings than other traits. In a second step, they also asked the participants to select the one most necessary quality for an ideal close friend. Of the 22 trait categories provided, only trustworthiness, extraversion, and similarity were selected more often than predicted by chance. While this research included a large number of traits (75 traits that formed 22 trait categories) and was based on a theoretical perspective, the specific traits presented to participants were not derived from a comprehensive classification of valued traits and it is somewhat unclear how the trait categories were formed.

In a more indirect approach to identifying qualities adolescents desire in friends, Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn (2011) reviewed a number of potentially relevant characteristics for the selection of friends from the literature. They identified physical attractiveness, school performance, common interests, sports performance, care and loyalty, social skills, and popularity as relevant characteristics. Empirically, they found social skills to be the criterion that was most commonly shared and considered most relevant for selection into a peer group, but concluded that the qualities they used might not have been the only relevant ones. The present study examined the set of qualities used by Pijl et al. (2011) together with the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification. By using a comprehensive classification of valued traits, in addition to previously suggested characteristics that add both non-behavioral and dyad-level characteristics not included in character strengths, a more complete picture of relevant qualities in friendships can be provided.

The first aim of the present research was to study whether character strengths are *desirable in a friend*, also when comparing them to other desirable qualities that are relevant for selecting friends (e.g., common interests). In addition to desirability, the perceived importance of qualities in a friend was also considered in order to rule out the possibility that character strengths may be perceived as highly desirable, but not equally important when compared to other previously established important qualities (see Cottrell et al., 2007; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Based on the theoretical assumptions presented in the VIA classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it was hypothesized that most character strengths would be desirable and certain character strengths would be particularly desirable: First, it was expected that the strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity – (1) *love*, (2) *kindness*, and (3) *social intelligence* – would be highly desirable in a friend as they are described as "interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29) and the behaviors related to these

strengths are clearly linked to central functions of friendship (such as help, intimacy, etc.). Further, it was expected that (4) *honesty*, (5) *teamwork*, and (6) *humor* would be among the most desired characteristics as these have been identified as qualities we particularly look for in close friends (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015; Sprecher & Regan, 2002).

Question 2: How do character strengths relate to being liked and having friends in the classroom?

Peer acceptance, or how much an individual is liked by his or her peers (Rubin et al., 2006), is a well-researched construct on the group-level of peer relationships. In contrast to friendships, peer acceptance is a unilateral construct – that is, it describes others' feelings of liking towards the child or adolescent (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Although peer acceptance is defined contextually (in relation to one specific classroom), research has found many stable behavioral correlates of high peer acceptance, such as acting appropriately in new social situations, accounting for other children's needs, and communicating coherently. Thus, highly accepted children are generally perceived as friendly, helpful, cooperative, and good leaders (Rubin et al., 2006).

Next to peer acceptance, both the quantity and quality of friendships have typically been studied as aspects of peer relationships contributing to positive development (e.g., Waldrip, Malcolm, & Jensen-Campbell, 2008). The number of friendships is typically determined by friendship nominations by both members of a friendship dyad. Friends who have both nominated each other are referred to as mutual friends (Rubin et al., 2006). While research has often focused on whether or not a child or adolescent has any mutual friends, some studies show that the number of mutual friends might also be relevant for adjustment: For instance, the number of mutual friends was found to uniquely go along with peer-rated prosocial skills (Gest, Graham-Bermann, & Hartup, 2001).

The second aim of the present study was to investigate how character strengths relate to *peer acceptance* and the *number of friends in the classroom*. Based on the definitions of the character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it was assumed that the expression of certain character strengths would be instrumental to being liked by peers and to forming and maintaining friendships in the classroom. In particular, it was hypothesized that the strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity – (1) *love*, (2) *kindness*, and (3) *social intelligence* would be relevant for positive peer relationships in the classroom – first because contributing to positive relationships is entailed in their definitions and second because many of the previously reported correlates of being liked and having friends (e.g., Rubin et al., 2006) go along with these strengths. In addition, it was expected that (4) *teamwork*, (5) *leadership* and (6) *humor* would be positively related to both peer acceptance in the classroom and the number of mutual friends one has in the classroom. Peterson and Seligman (2004) describe a person with a high level of teamwork as someone who "has a strong sense of duty, works for the good of the group rather than for personal gain, is loyal to friends, and can be trusted to

pull his or her weight" (p. 370). As such, teamwork is a predisposition for cooperative behavior that has been observed to go along with being liked and having friends (Rubin et al., 2006). Humor has also been associated with social competence, social attractiveness, and the ability to make friends (e.g., McGhee, 1989; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1996).

Question 3: How do character strengths relate to friendship quality?

Early adolescence is seen as the developmental period in which same-sex friendships become more intimate and supportive (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992) and in which associations between positive aspects of friendship quality and individual adjustment are assumed to be strongest (Rubin et al., 2015). Generally, three aspects of friendship quality are studied: friendship functions, conflict, and affective characteristics of the friendship (Rubin et al., 2015). The present study focused on positive aspects of friendship experiences and therefore positive friendship functions and friendship satisfaction (as affective characteristic) were assessed.

Several approaches to studying friendships functions have been suggested. Based on a review of different measures, Mendelson and Aboud (1999) identified six positive functions of friendships: *Stimulating companionship* describes doing pleasurable and exciting things together; *Help* is defined as giving support and guidance; *Intimacy* refers to making the friend feel he or she can disclose private information, emotions, and thoughts openly and to paying attention to the friend's needs; *Reliable alliance* describes demonstrating loyalty to the friend, even in difficult situations; *Self-validation* refers to reassuring, encouraging and supporting the friend in maintaining a positive self-image; and *Emotional security* is defined as providing safety and comfort in situations in which the friend feels insecure or scared. These positive friendship functions contribute to both friendship satisfaction, indicating the positive evaluation of the relationship and the friends' affection towards each other, and friendship stability.

The third aim of the present study was to investigate the relationships between character strengths and friendship satisfaction as well as positive friendship functions. For this purpose, actor and partner effects of character strengths on these outcomes were studied. It was hypothesized that none of the character strengths would be negatively related to friendship satisfaction, and that in particular strengths related to interpersonal relationships, such as (1) *love*, (2) *kindness*, (3) *social intelligence*, and (4) *teamwork*, would show positive partner effects on friendship satisfaction (i.e., positive relationships between friend A's character strengths and friend B's friendship satisfaction, when friend B's strengths are controlled for). It was expected that these strengths would also be related to many of the six friendship functions, which are all assumed to contribute to overall friendship satisfaction. Further, it was expected that additional strengths would be particularly instrumental to specific friendship functions. In particular, (1) *perspective* was expected to be positively related to the friendship functions *emotional*

security, *help*, and *intimacy* as this strength entails being able to give wise counsel to friends (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which should result in the friend feeling helped and emotionally secure as well as create intimacy. Additionally, (2) *creativity*, (3) *zest*, (4) *leadership,* and (5) *humor* were expected to be positively related to *stimulating companionship* as they all should go along with initiating (fun) activities together, and leadership to be additionally related to *help* as it also entails helping others to complete tasks. Finally, (6) *honesty* was expected to be positively related to *intimacy* because both aspects entailed in the definition of this character strength, *sincerity* and *authenticity*, can be seen as important basis for building intimacy.

The different aspects of peer relationships investigated in this study (peer acceptance, number of friendships, and quality of friendships) have been found to interrelate, but do not always go along with each other or with the same correlates (e.g., Glick & Rose, 2011; Ladd et al., 1997; Parker & Asher, 1993). Recently, it has been suggested that peer group functioning and friendship functioning represent different indicators of social competence that still share common features (Flannery & Smith, 2017). For instance, Flannery and Smith (2017) propose that perspective-taking, having a sense of humor, prosocial behavior and helping (i.e., the character strengths of perspective/social intelligence, humor, and kindness) are the basis for both types of functioning. Larson, Whitton, Hauser, and Allen (2007) compared close relationship competence (related to friendship) with social group competence (related to peer acceptance). Their assessment included items referring to the character strengths of kindness, love, and perspective for close relationship competence as well as items referring to the character strengths of humor, social intelligence, and teamwork for social group competence. These ideas suggest that certain character strengths might go along with all studied aspects of peer relationships, and others might be more specific to one of the aspects, which will be investigated in an explorative manner.

Method

Participants

In total, 383 students in 20 classrooms in German-speaking Switzerland and Liechtenstein were approached to participate in the study. The participation rate was 93.0%, resulting in a sample size of $N = 356$. Data from 17 participants were excluded from further analyses because their responses showed obvious response patterns ($n = 11$) or their language skills were considered insufficient to fully understand the questionnaires, that is, they had indicated speaking German for less than 3 years ($n = 6$).[1]. Thus, the final sample was comprised of 339 students (46.9% male and 53.1% female) attending the fifth ($n = 32$), sixth ($n = 89$), seventh ($n = 120$), eighth ($n = 64$), and ninth ($n = 34$) grade. They had a mean age of 12.84 years ($SD = 1.29$; range: 10 to 17 years). Most participants (78%) were between 12 and 14 years old. The average class size was 19.15 students ($SD = 4.20$), and

[1] Including those participants, however, did not change the outcome of the analyses significantly.

students in one classroom typically spent the entire school day together – thus, they are also referred to as "classmates". The subsample of mutual best friends (i.e., participants that had mutually nominated each other as best friend) consisted of $N = 136$ participants (52.9% female) with a mean age of 13.04 years ($SD = 1.21$) in 78 same-sex dyads, after the only other-sex dyad had been excluded from the analyses (as it is often done in studies, see Rubin et al., 2015).

In selecting the sample size, considerations of statistical power were also taken into account. To determine an appropriate sample size for the planned multilevel Actor Partner Interdependence Model for indistinguishable dyads (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), APIMPowerR (Ackerman & Kenny, 2016) was used. The smallest number of dyads necessary to detect both actor and partner effect sizes of .25 at a power of .80 ($\alpha = .05$) with a correlation between partners of $r = .30$ was determined to be 56.

Instruments

Different sources of data were combined (peer nominations, self-reports, and friend reports) in an effort to minimize the influence of shared method variance and thus to strengthen the conclusions to be drawn from the analyses.

Nomination procedures.

Peer acceptance. To assess peer acceptance, participants were presented with the names of all their classmates and were asked to select all classmates they liked, which is a widely used method to assess this construct (Rubin et al., 2015). The instructions read: "Please select those classmates that you like. These could be those classmates that you like to spend your breaks with or that you enjoy sitting next to." They were also informed that it was possible not to select any of their classmates and that their answers would not be shown to anyone. The number of received nominations was then divided by the maximal possible number of nominations (i.e., number of participating students in the classroom minus 1) to take into account differences in class size.

Number of (mutual) friends. To assess the number of mutual friends, a *reciprocal nomination procedure* (see e.g., Pijl et al., 2011) was used: Students were presented with the list of their classmates and were asked to choose up to five classmates whom they perceived as friends. The instructions read: "Please select those classmates who are your friends in the class. You don't have to select anyone and you can select up to five classmates." Pairs of students were considered *mutual friends* when they had both selected each other, and each student could have between 0 and 5 mutual friends. In a second step, participants selected the best friend in the classroom among the previously nominated friends. Pairs of students were considered *mutual best friends* when they had selected each other as best friends in the class. In case they had nominated a best friend in the classroom, participants were asked to provide some information about the friendship (e.g., whether they considered the person to be "one of

their friends", "one of their best friends", or "their very best friend") and then completed the questionnaires on friendship functions and friendship satisfaction about this person. Independent of whether they had nominated a best friend in the classroom, they were asked to indicate how many friends they had outside of the classroom.

Self-reports.

Character strengths. The *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth* (VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006) adapted to German by Ruch, Weber, Park and Peterson (2014) was used to assess the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA-Youth consists of 198 items, with about one third of the items reverse coded. Seven to nine items assess one character strength. The VIA-Youth uses a 5-point Likert-style answer format (from 5 = *very much like me* to 1 = *not like me at all*). A sample item is "When I start a project, I always finish it" (perseverance). The VIA-Youth proved to be a reliable and valid measure (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2006; Ruch, Weber, et al., 2014). In this study, the internal consistencies of the 24 scales ranged from $\alpha = .58$ (social intelligence) to $\alpha = .90$ (spirituality), yielding a median of $\alpha = .78$. Only three of the 24 scales (social intelligence, humility [$\alpha = .64$], and self-regulation [$\alpha = .69$]) yielded internal consistency coefficients of $\alpha < .70$.

Desirability and importance of qualities in a friend. The *Ideal Friend Profiler* was created for assessing the desirability and importance of the 24 character strengths of the VIA classification and additional qualities in a friend (adapted from the Ideal Partner Profiler as used in Weber & Ruch, 2012). In a first step, participants were presented with the 24 character strengths and six additional qualities (good looks, popularity, common interests, good grades, sportiness, and social skills) including a short description of each of the strengths and qualities. As demonstrated by Ruch and Proyer (2015), these short descriptions of the 24 character strengths in the VIA classification converged well with other definitions of the strengths (i.e., strength name including synonyms, brief definitions, longer descriptions, and questionnaire items). Descriptions in a similar form were presented for the additional qualities to ensure that participants understood the terms in a similar way. Additional qualities and character strengths were presented in a randomized order. Participants were asked to rate on an asymmetrical 5-point rating scale how desirable each quality was for an ideal friend (1 = "not at all or little desirable", 2 = "somewhat desirable", 3 = "quite desirable", 4 = "desirable", 5 = "very desirable"). In a second step, participants were asked to select the five of the 30 traits presented that they considered the most important for a good friend. Lastly, they were asked to put these five qualities in a rank order according to their importance. These last two steps forced the participants to decide for the five and then the single most important quality in a friend. This procedure is especially relevant when comparing highly desirable traits (see e.g., Cottrell et al., 2007).

Friendship functions and friendship satisfaction. The *McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Friend Functions* (MFQ-FF; Mendelson and Aboud, 1999) was used to assess positive friendship functions and the *McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection* (MFQ-RA; Mendelson and Aboud, 1999) was used to assess friendship satisfaction. The questionnaires were originally developed for use with young adults, so a few of the items were slightly adapted to make them more easily understandable for adolescents. Informal pretesting revealed that younger adolescents might not readily understand the answer scales ranging from -4 to +4 for the MFQ-RA and 0 to 8 for the MFQ-FF. Therefore, it was changed to a 6-point Likert scale that was similar to other answer formats used in the survey (ranging from 1 = "rarely applies" to 6 = "always applies"). The items were translated to German following a standardized translation-back translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). All items require the name of the friend to be inserted in the sentence (e.g., "_____is someone I can tell secrets to."), which was implemented automatically in the online questionnaire used.

The MFQ-FF consists of 30 items and assesses the extent to which the respondent perceives the friend to fulfill six different positive friendship functions (i.e., stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security) with five items each. A sample item is "___ would make me feel comfortable in a new situation." (emotional security). A confirmatory factor analysis of the German translation of the MFQ-FF using the R package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) with a DWLS estimator yielded a good fit of the assumed six-factor model to the data: $\chi 2$ (390, N = 339) = 749.81, $p < .001$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .052, 95% CI [.047, .058]. Comparable to the original version (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999), the six scales yielded high internal consistency coefficients of $\alpha = .86$ (stimulating companionship and help), $\alpha = .90$ (intimacy), $\alpha = .91$ (self-validation), and $\alpha = .92$ (reliable alliance and emotional security).

The MFQ-RA consists of 16 items that assess satisfaction with the friendship (sample item: "I am satisfied with my friendship with ___.") and positive feelings regarding the friendship (sample item: "I enjoy having ___ as a friend"). Mendelson and Aboud (1999) suggested that it is possible to analyze these two aspects separately. In the context of the present study, this distinction is of lesser importance. In addition, the items' contents seemed to overlap strongly and the two scales correlated very highly, $r(314) = .92$. This is why a mean score over all 16 items was used as an indicator for satisfaction with the friendship in a broader sense (encompassing both satisfaction and positive feelings). This one-factor model yielded a high internal consistency ($\alpha = .96$) and an acceptable fit to the data: $\chi 2$ (104, N = 339) = 223.31, $p < .001$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .058, 95% CI [.048, .068].

The MFQ-FF and MFQ-RA have been shown to be sensitive to different types of friendships (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). This finding was replicated in the present study: Means in all six friendship functions (MFQ-FF) as well as friendship satisfaction (MFQ-RA) were higher for participants who indicated that their best friend in the classroom was their very best

friend compared to those who indicated that it was not one of their best friends (all $p < .001$). The correlations between the MFQ-FF scales and the MFQ-RA in the subsample of mutual best friends ranged between $r(133) = .62$ (reliable alliance) and $r(133) = .71$ (emotional security), with a mean correlation of $r(133) = .66$ (all $p < .001$).

Procedure

Before the data collection started, the institutional ethics board approved the study. Students received a thorough description of the study and written informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. Participating students under the age of 14 years also provided written permission of their parents or legal guardians. None of the students was paid for the participation and all participated voluntarily. Data were collected in classrooms and students completed the questionnaires online on computers provided by the schools. Research assistants oversaw the completion of the questionnaires and gave standardized instructions. The participants first completed the VIA-Youth and, after a break, the nomination procedure, the questions on friendships as well as other measures not relevant for the aims of this study. Overall, the data collection took between two and three lessons (i.e., between 90 and 135 minutes), including breaks. After the data collection was completed, students were provided with individual feedback on their character strengths.

Results

Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

On average, students nominated 4.23 ($SD = 1.20$) classmates that they considered friends (of the maximum of five) and only five participants indicated that they did not want to nominate any friends in the classroom. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the VIA-Youth and the results of the peer nominations as well as correlations with age and *t*-tests for sex differences in these variables. The results for the VIA-Youth were highly similar results to previously reported findings (e.g., Ruch, Weber, et al., 2014): Female participants had higher scores on a number of character strengths – most notably *kindness* and *appreciation of beauty and excellence* and younger participants also scored higher on a number of character strengths (most notably *love of learning* and *perseverance*). Peer acceptance and number of mutual friends were not related to age or sex (both $p > .05$), while the number of received nominations as a friend was slightly higher for male and younger participants. In addition, female participants reported higher scores in all six friendship features (all $p < .001$), ranging from $d = -0.41$ (*stimulating companionship*) to $d = -0.98$ (*emotional security*), as well as in the total score across all friendship functions, $t(302.44) = -6.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$, and in friendship satisfaction, $t(314) = -5.22$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$. Scores in three functions were also higher for younger participants: *help*, $r(313) = -.13$, $p = .03$, *self-validation*, $r(313) = -.20$, $p < .001$, and *stimulating companionship,* $r(313)$

= -.14, p = .01. As small to moderate sex and age differences were observed in many of the variables of interest, sex and age were either controlled for in the analyses or sex and age differences were reported.

Question 1: Which qualities are desired in an ideal friend?

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and confidence intervals for the rating of desirability in a friend, as well as frequencies with which character strengths and other traits were selected as among the five most important qualities in a friend.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that *humor*, *honesty*, *kindness*, and *fairness* received the numerically highest desirability ratings and were on average all rated at least as "desirable" in a friend (= received a mean score with a 95% CI not including values < 4). These four strengths were among the six that were expected to be particularly desirable. The remaining two expected strengths (love and social intelligence) also received high ratings. Overall, 16 strengths were rated at least as "quite desirable" (= a mean score with a 95% CI not including values < 3). Only four character strengths received average ratings that corresponded to less than "quite desirable" but three of them (*humility*, *judgment*, and *love of learning*) were still considered at least "somewhat desirable" (= a mean score with a 95% CI not including values < 2). *Spirituality* was the only strength for which the 95% confidence interval included values below 2. In order to compare the desirability of the 24 character strengths to the desirability of the additional qualities, paired-samples t-tests were computed for testing the desirability of each of the character strengths against the desirability of the respective characteristic. The results revealed that 23 strengths were rated as more desirable than *good grades,* 20 strengths were rated as more desirable than *popularity*, 18 as more desirable than *good looks,* 16 as more desirable than *sportiness*, and four were rated as more desirable than *common interests* and *social skills* (all p < .01). These four strengths (honesty, humor, kindness, and fairness) were among those that were expected to receive the highest ratings.

When considering the frequencies with which the strengths were selected to be one of the five most important qualities in a friend, the results resembled the desirability ratings overall. The four character strengths that were most commonly mentioned as most important in a friend were again *humor*, *honesty*, *kindness*, and *fairness.* To test whether these four character strengths were selected more often than the additional qualities as one of the five most important characteristics, McNemar's tests were computed (testing the null hypothesis that the frequency distributions of paired nominal data are equal). The results revealed that humor, honesty, kindness, and fairness were chosen more frequently than all additional characteristics (all p < .01).

Male and female participants did not differ in how desirable they perceived most character strengths in a friend. Exceptions were *judgment*, which was rated as more desirable by boys than by girls, $t(300) = 3.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.41$, and

honesty, $t(270.55) = -4.13$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.50$, and *love*, $t(289.97) = -4.08$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.48$, which were both rated as more desirable by girls when compared to boys (with small to medium effect sizes). Some character strengths (namely *love of learning*, *teamwork*, *fairness*, *leadership*, *forgiveness*, *humility*, and *prudence*) were rated as more desirable in a friend by younger participants than by older participants (all $p < .05$), but none of the correlations with age exceeded $|r(300)| = .20$, thus indicating small effects.

Overall, all correlations between the desirability of a strength in a friend (Ideal Friend Profiler) and the respective self-reported strength (VIA-Youth) when controlling for influences of age and sex were positive and on average medium-sized, $r = .29$ (range: $r(298) = .07$, $p = .217$, for *humility* to $r(298) = .52$, $p < .001$, for *spirituality*). When looking at mutual best friends in the classroom, correlations with the desirability ratings of the one friend and the character strengths of the other friend in the classroom were mostly small and positive (controlling for sex and mean age of the pair). The numerically highest correlations were found for *zest*, $r(128) = .36$, *love of learning*, $r(128) = .35$, *spirituality*, $r(128) = .26$, *love*, and *kindness*, both $r(128) = .24$, all $p < .01$. The only negative correlation was found for *prudence*, $r(128) = -.19$, $p < .05$.

Question 2: How do character strengths relate to being liked and having friends in the classroom?

Partial correlations (controlling for sex and age) were computed to examine the associations of character strengths with peer acceptance, the number of received nominations as a friend, and the number of mutual friends. To interpret the size of these correlations, the effect size guidelines for research in individual differences by Gignac and Szodorai (2016) were used, suggesting small, medium, and large effects to correspond to correlations of .10, .20, and .30, respectively, in this context. Table 3 presents the correlation coefficients.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3 shows that five of the six character strengths expected to be of particular importance for positive peer relationships in the classroom (*love*, *kindness*, *social intelligence*, *teamwork*, and *humor*) correlated positively with all three indicators (peer acceptance, received friend nominations, and number of mutual friends). The sixth hypothesized character strength (*leadership*) also showed positive relationships with peer acceptance and the number of received nominations as a friend. In addition, *perspective* correlated positively with all three indicators and *humility* with peer acceptance and the number of mutual friends. Effect sizes were in a small to medium range. There were also small negative correlations between *curiosity, love of learning*, and *spirituality* and the number of mutual friends.

In an additional analysis, unilateral friendship nominations were considered, which have been described as desired friendships (e.g., Thomas & Bowker, 2013). Received unilateral friendship nominations were operationalized by subtracting the number of mutual friends from the number of received nominations as a friend, divided by the number of participating students in the classroom minus 1. Partial correlations (controlling for age and sex) with the 24 character strengths showed that eleven character strengths were positively related to received unilateral friendship nominations (creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective, bravery, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and humor), with *r*s ranging from .11 (leadership) to .21 (kindness), all $p < .05$. There were no negative correlations between character strengths and received unilateral friendship nominations.

Given the presence of some sex differences in the variables of interest, it was tested whether the associations were moderated by sex by computing multiple regression analyses, entering the respective character strength, sex, age and an interaction term between the character strength and sex as predictors. For peer acceptance as criterion, no moderation effects were found. For the number of received nominations as a friend as criterion, the effects of two strengths were moderated by sex. When inspected separately, the correlation between perspective and received friend nominations was stronger for boys, $r\,(156) = .35$, $p < .001$, than for girls, $r\,(177) = .15$, $p = .048$. Similarly, the correlation between teamwork and received friend nominations was only present in boys, $r\,(156) = .32$, $p < .001$, but not in girls, $r\,(177) = .07$, $p = .341$. For the number of mutual friends as criterion, there was a significant moderation effect for self-regulation, which was negatively correlated in boys, $r\,(151) = -.19$, $p = .018$, and uncorrelated in girls, $r\,(167) = .04$, $p = .587$. Overall, however, most associations were not moderated by sex.

Question 3: How do character strengths relate to friendship quality?

For the analyses regarding this third research question, the data of mutual best friends (i.e., participants that had mutually nominated each other as best friends in the classroom) were used in a dyadic format. In order to account for the interdependence of the data deriving from two members of a dyad, the data were analyzed using a multilevel Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) for indistinguishable dyads (Kenny et al., 2006). This model estimates both actor effects (i.e., the extent to which the person's independent variable influences his or her score on the dependent variable) and partner effects (i.e., the extent to which the person' independent variable influences his or her partner's score on the dependent variable), which allows measuring the influence partners have on each other. Data collected from two dyad members are more likely to be correlated with each other than data from members of different dyads – this dyadic dependence is also taken into account in the APIM (Kenny et al., 2006). In conducting a dyadic analysis, it needs to be considered whether distinguishable or indistinguishable dyads are studied. Dyadic distinguishability describes whether the two members of a dyad can be differentiated

using one distinctive dichotomous variable, which also needs to be relevant to the research question (Peugh, DiLillo, & Panuzio, 2013). The present study presents a case in which the two dyad members cannot be meaningfully differentiated using a within-dyad variable, such as sex (Kenny & Cook, 1999), that is indistinguishable dyads (of same-sex friends). As a consequence, only one actor and one partner effect is estimated, which is set to be identical for both members of the dyad. The APIM models were computed using the package nlme (Pinheiro, Bates, DebRoy, Sarkar, & R Core Team, 2017) in R. The parameter estimates for both actor and partner effects are given in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 4 shows that, as expected, *love*, *kindness*, *social intelligence*, and *teamwork* showed significant partner effects on friendship satisfaction and the mean score across the six friendship functions. Four additional character strengths (*perspective*, *honesty*, *gratitude*, and *spirituality*) also showed partner effects on friendship satisfaction and six additional character strengths (*perspective*, *bravery*, *honesty*, *leadership*, *gratitude*, and *humor*) showed partner effects on the mean score across the six friendship functions. As also displayed in Table 4, 15 character strengths showed actor effects on friendship satisfaction and 19 character strengths showed actor effects on the mean across the friendship functions, and all partner and actor effects that reached statistical significance were positive.

For the friendship function *stimulating companionship*, the expected positive partner effects were found for creativity, zest, love, social intelligence, leadership, and humor, as well as additionally for gratitude and spirituality. Notably, the only negative partner effect was observed for self-regulation, i.e., friends of participants high in self-regulation perceived lower levels of stimulating companionship in their friendships. For the friendship function *help*, the expected positive partner effects for perspective, love, kindness, social intelligence, and teamwork were found, as well as partner effects for five additional character strengths. For the function *intimacy*, the expected partner effects for perspective, honesty, kindness, love, social intelligence and teamwork were observed, as well as additional effects for ten character strengths. For *reliable alliance*, the only partner effect was found for humor, and for *self-validation*, the only partner effect was found for love. For *emotional security*, partner effects were found again for love, kindness, social intelligence, and teamwork, and additionally for five character strengths. In addition, there were many positive actor effects across all friendship functions. Curiosity and humility consistently showed actor effects, while they did not display any partner effects.

Again, it was also tested whether actor and partner effects in the APIM model were moderated by sex of the dyad. The procedure suggested by Garcia, Kenny, and Ledermann (2015) was used, that is, including interaction terms of both actor and

partner effects and sex into the multilevel model. With regards to friendship satisfaction, the only effect that was moderated by sex was the partner effect of spirituality on friendship satisfaction ($p = .046$). When inspected separately, this partner effect of spirituality on friendship quality was non-significant for female dyads ($p = .629$), but significant for male dyads ($p = .011$). For the mean score across the six friendship functions, only the partner effect of kindness was moderated by sex ($p = .046$), which was significant in male dyads ($p = .006$) and not in female dyads ($p = .691$). Across all possible effects, there were eight partner effects (one on the function intimacy, six on help, and one on stimulating companionship) and ten actor effects (four on the function emotional security and six on the function self-validation) that were found to significantly vary by sex. These effects were all stronger for dyads consisting of boys than of girls. However, the large majority of actor and partner effects was not moderated by sex.

Discussion

The present study investigated the role of character strengths in adolescent friendships in the classroom setting from different perspectives. First, it was studied which character strengths adolescents most look for in their friends. Humor, honesty, kindness, and fairness were considered both most desirable and most important in a friend. In addition, gratitude, teamwork, love, forgiveness, social intelligence, bravery, hope, and creativity were also frequently selected as both desirable and important qualities of a good friend. Consequently, the expectations that love, kindness, social intelligence, honesty, humor, and teamwork would be rated as particularly desirable were confirmed. While fairness was not predicted to be among the most desired and important strengths, it can be easily linked with trustworthiness and moral behavior, which are highly valued in friendships, as fairness "allow(s) us to be responsible citizens, trustworthy friends, and generally moral people" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 392).

Taken together, the results resemble what (slightly older) adolescents look for in romantic partners (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Honesty, humor, and love were also most frequently nominated in regards to romantic partners, and many of the other strengths considered important in friends were also considered important in romantic partners (such as kindness, hope, gratitude, fairness, creativity, curiosity, social intelligence, and forgiveness). However, some character strengths appeared high on the list of important strengths in friendships, but were not considered as equally important in romantic relationships. Among these were bravery, kindness, and teamwork. Thus, when looking at the results of these two studies together, a group of strengths seems to be generally desired in relationship partners (friends or romantic partners) and some strengths seem to be specific to the type of relationship in question.

The present study also included additional qualities previously identified as relevant for selecting friends to allow for a comparison between the character strengths and these qualities. The results showed that four character strengths (humor, honesty, kindness, and fairness) were considered both more desirable and more important in a friend than common interests and social skills (the most desirable and important of these additional qualities). Also, a large number of character strengths were seen as more desirable and important in a friend than being sporty, popular, attractive, or receiving good grades. This clearly underlines the relevance of character strengths for selecting friends and hints at the relevance of good character in friendships and positive peer relationships overall.

Second, the relationships between character strengths and different indicators of peer status in the classroom (peer acceptance, received friend nominations, and number of mutual friends) were investigated. Six strengths stood out by being related to all three indicators: As expected, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, and humor showed positive correlations, as well as perspective in addition to the hypothesized strengths. Leadership, humility, and gratitude were positively correlated with at least two of the indicators. There were also two unexpected negative correlations across the different indicators of peer status (curiosity and love of learning with number of mutual friends), which were, however, small in size and only present for one indicator each. Consequently, one would not conclude that these strengths are negatively related to peer acceptance in the classroom. In addition, received unilateral friendship nominations were positively related to creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective, bravery, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, leadership, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and humor. This underlines the idea that these character strengths are particularly desired in friends.

When comparing the present findings to the results reported in Park and Peterson (2006), it should be noted that they assessed perceived popularity, which has been conceptually distinguished from peer acceptance (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). The latter describes being well-liked by peers as a play partner or friend and the former describes being dominant, visible, and having a high prestige. Despite these conceptual differences, both Park and Peterson (2006) and the present study found leadership to be positively related to indicators of peer acceptance. In addition, the present study also found that peer acceptance was associated with the strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity; a result that Park and Peterson (2006) expected, but did not find in their study. The convergence with the findings by Shoshani and Aviv (2012) as well as Shoshani and Slone (2013) seems relatively high. However, in these studies the results were only reported on the level of (different) factor solutions and they used a previous version of the VIA-Youth, so the results cannot be compared in detail. Finally, previous studies on character strengths in peer relationships have used teacher ratings to assess perceived popularity or social adjustment. Teachers might base their judgment regarding popularity also on whether students show classroom behaviors that they find desirable (see Wagner & Ruch, 2015, for

correlations with teacher-rated positive classroom behavior). Peers, however, seem to be a more adequate source for a number of reasons: a) they are the ones who the information on a classmate's social status is referring to, b) they have the most opportunities to observe their classmates behavior in many different situations, and c) by aggregating the perspectives of many classmates, the influences of experiences specific to one individual become very small (Bukowski, Cillessen, & Velásquez, 2012). Looking at the present results together with those of previous studies, it can be concluded that the strengths assigned to the virtues of humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence) and justice (teamwork, leadership) as well as humor and perspective, which both are highly relevant in social interactions, seem to be instrumental to peer acceptance and having friendships in the classroom.

Third, the present study addressed the relationships of character strengths with friendship quality. Some of the character strengths (curiosity, zest, and humility) mainly showed actor effects on both friendship satisfaction and positive friendship functions. That is, they were mainly related to how the friend him- or herself perceived the quality of the friendship. These effects might indicate that those character strengths not only relate to perceiving one's friendship positively, but also to seeing good in others – since friendship quality as measured with the instrument used is directly referring to the friend and the friendship. Many character strengths showed both actor and partner effects on both aspects of friendship quality. This suggests that the strengths can both contribute to one's own and one's friend's positive perception of the friendship quality. Love and kindness tended to show stronger partner than actor effects for some of the friendship functions; that is, they tended to contribute stronger to the friend's perception of the friendship quality than to one's own perception. When looking at specific friendship functions, one of the arguably most central functions of friendship, intimacy, showed partner effects for fifteen character strengths, which underlines the importance of character strengths for this central feature of friendships and positive relationships in general.

Differences between desired traits in friends, peer acceptance, and friendships

Taken together, the strengths that adolescents appreciate most in friends largely overlap with those that were related to friendship outcomes, with only a few exceptions. For example, *fairness* was highly valued but did not show relations to the outcomes measured here; *humility* and *leadership* were valued – but not highly valued – and did show meaningful relations to the outcomes studied. Thus, overall, adolescents valued those strengths the most that were also found to show the most meaningful relationships with positive peer relationships.

The strengths that were related to peer acceptance were similar, but not identical, to those strengths that were most relevant for friendship quality, which is in line with the idea that these aspects of peer relations are linked but can be

distinguished and have somewhat different correlates (e.g., Glick & Rose, 2011; Ladd et al., 1997; Parker & Asher, 1993). In particular, the strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity (love, kindness and social intelligence), as well as teamwork and perspective were equally related to peer acceptance and friendship quality. It can be assumed that these strengths are instrumental to various aspects of positive relationships in general (see also Wagner, Gander, Proyer, & Ruch, in press) and thus underlie both being liked by peers and building and maintaining high-quality friendships. The character strengths of leadership and humor were also linked to both aspects but showed stronger associations with peer acceptance than with friendship quality. They were related to specific friendship functions as expected (in particular *stimulating companionship*), but were not related to friend-rated friendship satisfaction. Conversely, the character strengths of honesty and gratitude were not related to peer acceptance but were important in the context of dyadic friendship quality.

Which character strengths matter the most for positive peer relationships in the classroom?

Overall, the three character strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence) were most consistently and substantially linked to positive peer relationships in the classroom and friendship quality. The definitions of both *love* and *kindness* as a character strength encompass elements that can be described as central to positive peer relationships and friendships, such as valuing being close to others and investing in close relationships, taking care of others and helping them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). So the present results support the notion that these traits are not only what adolescents look for in their friends, but also relate to being liked by peers, having mutual friends, and contribute to friendship quality. It is noteworthy that love and kindness not only yielded consistent partner effects on different aspects of friendship quality, but they were also the only two strengths that showed (numerically) stronger partner than actor effects for some of the aspects. This finding lends support to the notion that love and kindness are not only related to an individual's well-being, but also contribute to the well-being of others. *Social intelligence* entails awareness of both one's own and other people's feelings and motives and knowledge on how to behave in a variety of social situations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which can be considered an important prerequisite for building and maintaining positive peer relationships. This assumption can be supported by the results of this study as social intelligence was relevant in all studied aspects. On a statistical note: As in previous studies (e.g., Ruch, Weber, et al., 2014), social intelligence yielded a rather low (though still acceptable) internal consistency. This might be partly due to the breadth and complexity of the construct, which has been described as entailing many different behaviors (see e.g., McCallister, Nash, & Meckstroth, 1996). As a result of the rather low internal consistency, the size of possible correlations between social intelligence and the friendship-related variables was more restricted than for most of the other character strengths, and might thus be underestimated.

Apart from the three strengths assigned to the virtue of humanity, three additional character strengths stood out by showing substantial relationships with all studied aspects: humor, teamwork, and gratitude. *Humor* as a character strength is characterized by liking to laugh, tease, and make others smile (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) – thus, it seems instrumental for building and maintaining positive relationships with others. In fact, Ruch and Proyer (2015) found that humor was seen as more strongly contributing to the virtue of humanity than to the virtue of transcendence. In the present study, humor was rated to be one of the most desirable and important qualities of a friend, and it also showed consistent associations with peer acceptance and number of friends as well as with friendship satisfaction and positive friendship functions (in particular partner effects for stimulating companionship and reliable alliance). Recent research on class clowns (Ruch, Platt, & Hofmann, 2014) has suggested that a large majority of adolescents who show class clown behavior have humor among their signature strengths (i.e., the character strengths that are highly typical of them). Thus, it seems plausible that while humor shown in the classroom as class clown behavior has been shown to be associated with some costs, for instance impaired relationships with teachers or lower school satisfaction and GPA (Platt, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016), it might – like humor in general (McGhee, 1989) – also have interpersonal benefits in terms of peer acceptance or number of friends.

The definition of *teamwork* as a character strength is strongly linked to loyalty in friendships and larger groups (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which can be seen as a central feature of friendship. This is mirrored in the results of this study with teamwork being among the most valued qualities in friends and also showing substantial correlations to the indicators of peer acceptance and friendship quality. Teamwork also showed partner effects for friendship satisfaction and most of the positive friendship functions – though somewhat surprisingly not for the functions reliable alliance and self-validation. Since theses scales showed by far the fewest significant partner effects (only one each), this might also be due to the nature of the scales. However, the other friendship functions for which partner effects for teamwork were found, such as intimacy or help, are also strongly linked to the experience of loyalty and trust in friendships.

Gratitude also showed up consistently as a relevant quality in positive peer relationships across the results for all three research questions. This is in line with assumptions that gratitude contributes to relational well-being (e.g., Bono & Froh, 2009) and empirical findings that show its relationship with outcomes such as social integration (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011). In addition, *perspective* and *leadership*, which both were not among the most desirable and important traits for a friend, showed positive relationships to a number of indicators of peer status and to some aspects of friendship quality. *Perspective* is expressed in behaviors that are conducive to building and maintaining friendships, such as taking others' needs and feelings into account and being someone others like to turn to for advice. In the present study, perspective also showed a partner

effect on friendship satisfaction, next to the hypothesized partner effects on help, intimacy, and emotional security. The definition of *leadership* in the VIA classification has a prosocial focus and includes behaviors such as making sure that group activities happen, helping and motivating others while performing tasks, and taking initiative in social settings (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which are also desired behavior in friendships, especially in the context of the classroom. It is in line with this definition that leadership showed the hypothesized partner effects on stimulating companionship and help.

As predicted, *honesty* was among the most desirable and important qualities in a friend, and was selected most frequently – by almost 30% of the participants – as the single most important one of the 30 qualities provided. This finding corroborates the special role of honesty in interpersonal relationships in general and friendships in particular that was also found in studies using a less comprehensive set of positive traits (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2015). While honesty was mostly unrelated to peer acceptance and the number of friends, it showed the expected partner effects on friendship satisfaction, and as expected, on intimacy, help, and emotional security. Consequently, the current results provide evidence that honesty is not only a highly desired quality in a friend, but also that the self-reported level of honesty positively relates to how the respective friend perceives the quality of the friendship.

Fairness was also among the strengths that were considered both most desirable and most important. However, in contrast to all other strengths that were among the highest on these ratings, it did not show any substantial relationships with peer acceptance, number of friends, friendship satisfaction, or positive friendship functions. It might be that this character strength is valued in friends not necessarily because it has specific benefits in friendships (such as contributing to certain friendship functions), but because of its moral value. In fact, some of the items assessing fairness in the VIA-Youth explicitly mention not treating someone differently than others just because he or she is one's friend, but treating everyone the same. Another possibility to be explored in future research is that fairness could be related to the absence of conflict or to a constructive way of dealing with conflict in friendships, that is the absence of negative friendship features rather than the presence of positive friendship functions.

Unexpectedly, a few small negative associations with the outcomes were also found. For instance, s*elf-regulation* had a negative partner effect on the friendship function stimulating companionship. It seems plausible that a highly self-regulated friend might be somewhat less fun to be around, and the absence of further negative partner effects suggests that self-regulation should not conflict with other friendship functions, such as intimacy. Overall, however, the effect size of this negative association was small and it did not show up for the other outcomes, so one would not conclude that self-regulation was detrimental to peer relationships and friendships in the classroom. It is also conceivable that while high self-regulation might not contribute to being

a "fun" friend, it might be related to less conflict in friendships and instrumental to protecting friends from harm or problems, which was not covered in the positive friendship functions used in this study.

Sex differences

Given the presence of meaningful sex differences across many areas in peer relationships (see e.g., Rose & Rudolph, 2006), it was tested for each of the research questions whether the results varied by sex. When analyzing which character strengths were perceived as desirable in a friend, there were very little differences between boys and girls, only three of the 24 character strengths (judgment, honesty, and love) differed in their desirability. Regarding the relationships between character strengths and peer acceptance, again only three (of the 72) associations were moderated by sex. Finally, in the APIM analyses on the relationships between character strengths and friendship quality, again the large majority of effects was not moderated by sex. However, some effects were consistently found to be stronger for boys than for girls.

Results in the context of the VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues

In sum, the results of the present study support the notion that character plays an important role in friendships. It seems that one of the ways through which character strengths contribute to the good life of others is by being a good friend. Concretely, the results suggest that being a good friend entails displaying a number of character strengths and that character strengths are linked to favorable outcomes for individuals (being liked and having many friends) as well as for their friends (high friendship satisfaction and quality). In terms of the VIA classification, the results can be interpreted as supporting the first criterion put forward to defining character strengths by Peterson and Seligman (2004) – that they contribute to the good life, for oneself and others.

The results of the present study may also contribute to a better understanding of the role of *humility*. Humility is often unrelated or very weakly related to measures of well-being in studies using the VIA classification (e.g., Buschor, Proyer, & Ruch, 2013). In the present study, there were small, but significant associations of humility with peer acceptance and the number of mutual friends, which support assumptions on its interpersonal benefits, in particular group acceptance (e.g., Davis et al., 2013). Additionally, humility showed actor effects on friendship satisfaction and a number of friendship functions. Thus, when the items on satisfaction with the friendship are phrased in relation to the other person and are not asking about oneself, humility might indeed be related to the perception of satisfaction.

Strengths and limitations

The present study has several strengths: First of all, it used different data sources (self-reports, peer nominations, friend reports) to limit the influence of shared method variance. By combining multiple ways of looking at positive peer relationships in

the classroom, a number of character strengths that seem relevant across all perspectives could be identified, which allows for stronger conclusions. Second, looking at the influences of character strengths at the dyadic level has enabled new and interesting findings. Third, the sample – while not sampled to be representative – included different school types that exist in German-speaking Switzerland and Liechtenstein as well as different grade levels and both rural and more urban areas. Consequently, unlike in many previous studies, the sample used does not limit the present results to a specific setting.

Several limitations of this study also warrant mentioning. First, the cross-sectional study design does not allow drawing conclusions on the directions of effects or on causality. Variables were assessed at one time point to represent each construct in this study. Therefore, it was impossible to differentiate stable relationship variance from unstable error. As such, the study represents a first attempt to establish relationships between character strengths and peer relationships in early adolescents, and its findings should be corroborated in longitudinal studies. Second, this study intentionally focused on positive aspects of adolescents' character as well as on positive functions of friendships, so it cannot provide a complete picture on friendships. Negative features of friendship (e.g., conflict) should not be neglected in future research. It might be the case that certain character strengths (e.g., fairness, forgiveness, or self-regulation) will be more predictive of the absence of negative friendship functions than of the presence of positive friendship functions. Additionally, it was suggested that positive friendship functions might also have certain costs, such as experiencing empathetic distress (e.g., Smith & Rose, 2011). Studying these aspects together with the positive aspects could contribute to a deeper understanding of their respective relationships. Third, the number of possible friend nominations was restricted to five (though this is somewhat higher than the commonly found limit of three) and to friends within the classroom. In fact, while only five students decided not to nominate any friends within the classroom, a large majority (78.2%) indicated having five or more friends outside the classroom. Consequently, while the classroom represents a particularly important social context for early adolescents, most participants have some relevant friendships outside of the classroom as well. Thus, future research might also include friendships outside of the classroom as well as focus on other-sex dyads, which could not be analyzed in the present study due to their low frequency (only one dyad of mutual best friends was a boy-girl dyad). Finally, data on socioeconomic status or ethnicity were not collected in this study. The participants were attending schools in German-speaking Switzerland or Liechtenstein and presumably represent a rather homogeneous sample in terms of racial makeup (mostly European). Consequently, the present results might not extend to other cultural contexts or racial groups. Future studies might also take differences in socioeconomic status into account.

Future research

Due to the study's novel nature, its results implicate many questions to be answered in future research. An important question to be addressed is whether the character strengths most desirable and important in friends generalize to different age groups, perhaps even to adults. As research suggests that early adolescents understand friendship and its features in similar ways as adults do (e.g., Hartup & Stevens, 1999), a rather high degree of generalizability can be assumed. Nonetheless, certain character strengths might be more desired by older adolescents or adults than by early adolescents (e.g., perspective). Future research might also consider contextual features of the classroom (e.g., academic level, classroom size) that might influence the associations between character strengths and peer acceptance, which were found to be relevant for instance for the association between aggression and popularity (Garandeau, Ahn, & Rodkin, 2011). It would also be interesting to study constellations of character strengths in dyads of friends. For instance, future research might examine whether a fit between friends' strengths or a fit between the strengths that friend A desires in a friend and friend B displays is positively related to friendship quality. Ultimately, future research should also consider the role that friends and friendships might play in the development and co-development of character strengths.

Conclusions

Taken together, the present results demonstrate that a specific set of character strengths (i.e., love, kindness, social intelligence, humor, teamwork, gratitude, leadership, perspective, and honesty) can be considered most relevant for peer relationships and friendships in the classroom in general. Additional strengths showed specific associations with friendship functions (e.g., creativity with stimulating companionship). All in all, this suggests that almost all 24 character strengths have certain benefits for peer relationships and in friendships, which might be why we generally appreciate them and look for them in friends.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Character Strengths and Peer Nominations, Correlations with Age, and Comparisons Between Boys' and Girls' Scores

	Total sample (N = 324-339)			Boys (n = 154-159)		Girls (n = 170-180)		Comparison		
	M	*SD*	r_{Age}	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*d*
Character strengths										
Creativity	3.70	0.63	-.14**	3.70	0.64	3.70	0.61	-0.05	337	-0.01
Curiosity	3.62	0.59	-.09	3.60	0.64	3.63	0.55	-0.41	314.92	-0.05
Judgment	3.51	0.56	-.07	3.48	0.57	3.54	0.55	-0.93	337	-0.10
Love of learning	3.51	0.66	-.24***	3.39	0.68	3.62	0.63	-3.26**	337	-0.36
Perspective	3.66	0.52	-.01	3.57	0.48	3.74	0.53	-3.12**	337	-0.34
Bravery	3.73	0.57	-.06	3.65	0.57	3.80	0.57	-2.39*	337	-0.26
Perseverance	3.58	0.58	-.24***	3.51	0.57	3.64	0.58	-2.17*	337	-0.24
Honesty	3.69	0.58	-.12*	3.52	0.56	3.85	0.55	-5.40***	337	-0.59
Zest	3.62	0.58	-.10	3.63	0.52	3.61	0.62	0.34	337	0.04
Love	3.99	0.57	-.06	3.88	0.55	4.08	0.57	-3.23**	337	-0.35
Kindness	4.04	0.55	-.14*	3.84	0.56	4.21	0.47	-6.65***	337	-0.72
Social intelligence	3.77	0.45	-.07	3.76	0.44	3.78	0.45	-0.33	337	-0.04
Teamwork	3.99	0.48	-.16**	3.93	0.46	4.04	0.49	-2.13*	337	-0.23
Fairness	3.62	0.56	-.14*	3.49	0.52	3.74	0.56	-4.30***	337	-0.47
Leadership	3.33	0.65	-.02	3.29	0.64	3.36	0.65	-0.98	337	-0.11
Forgiveness	3.84	0.63	-.13*	3.79	0.61	3.89	0.65	-1.53	337	-0.17
Humility	3.69	0.51	.08	3.61	0.48	3.76	0.53	-2.85**	337	-0.31
Prudence	3.35	0.55	-.12*	3.29	0.53	3.41	0.57	-2.11*	337	-0.23
Self-regulation	3.51	0.55	-.08	3.48	0.53	3.54	0.57	-0.94	337	-0.10
Beauty	3.59	0.71	-.19***	3.32	0.70	3.84	0.62	-7.30***	337	-0.79
Gratitude	4.18	0.53	-.09	4.11	0.54	4.24	0.51	-2.35*	337	-0.26
Hope	3.79	0.58	.00	3.84	0.53	3.75	0.63	1.38	337	0.15
Humor	3.95	0.63	.03	3.96	0.63	3.95	0.63	0.05	337	0.01
Spirituality	3.42	1.07	-.18**	3.29	1.07	3.53	1.06	-2.06*	337	-0.22
Peer nominations										
Peer acceptance	0.36	0.16	-.04	0.37	0.16	0.36	0.16	0.31	337	0.03
Received friend nom.	0.23	0.13	-.15**	0.25	0.14	0.22	0.13	2.22*	337	0.24
Mutual friends	2.79	1.41	.10	2.89	1.46	2.71	1.36	1.17	322	0.13

Note. Beauty = Appreciation of beauty and excellence. Nom. = Nominations.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed),

Table 2

Desirability Ratings for Character Strengths and Characteristics (in Descending Order), and Frequencies of Being Selected as Among the Five Most Important Qualities in A Friend

	Desirability			Importance					
	M	*SD*	95% CI	Top 5	1	2	3	4	5
Character strengths									
Honesty	4.40	0.82	[4.30;4.49]	189	89	50	26	17	7
Humor	4.39	0.81	[4.30;4.48]	196	38	47	46	38	27
Kindness	4.27	0.89	[4.17;4.37]	190	65	60	30	28	7
Fairness	4.21	0.94	[4.10;4.32]	125	15	24	24	35	27
Love	3.93	1.03	[3.81;4.05]	54	8	7	13	8	18
Teamwork	3.93	0.98	[3.82;4.04]	64	5	8	11	24	16
Gratitude	3.92	0.96	[3.82;4.03]	89	8	19	27	18	17
Forgiveness	3.85	0.98	[3.74;3.96]	39	2	6	11	9	11
Social intelligence	3.73	1.07	[3.60;3.85]	42	7	6	12	6	11
Bravery	3.71	1.05	[3.59;3.83]	53	1	9	15	15	13
Hope	3.70	1.00	[3.59;3.81]	28	5	0	5	7	11
Creativity	3.62	1.07	[3.50;3.74]	42	2	9	8	11	12
Self-regulation	3.57	0.98	[3.46;3.68]	15	1	1	4	4	5
Perspective	3.53	1.02	[3.41;3.65]	10	3	2	2	1	2
Zest	3.49	1.03	[3.38;3.61]	14	3	1	4	2	4
Curiosity	3.48	1.04	[3.36;3.60]	29	2	2	5	8	12
Perseverance	3.36	1.03	[3.24;3.48]	14	1	1	0	5	7
Beauty	3.28	1.13	[3.15;3.41]	6	0	2	0	1	3
Leadership	3.09	1.12	[2.96;3.21]	7	0	0	2	1	4
Prudence	3.06	1.14	[2.93;3.19]	9	0	0	1	3	5
Humility	2.92	1.15	[2.79;3.05]	6	0	0	0	3	3
Judgment	2.88	1.15	[2.75;3.01]	6	0	1	1	2	2
Love of learning	2.79	1.11	[2.67;2.92]	3	0	0	0	1	2
Spirituality	2.10	1.21	[1.96;2.23]	9	4	2	0	2	1
Characteristics									
Social skills	3.96	0.99	[3.85;4.07]	67	10	9	25	11	12
Common interests	3.82	1.08	[3.70;3.94]	87	19	19	11	18	20
Sportiness	3.26	1.29	[3.11;3.40]	57	9	8	8	12	20
Good looks	2.96	1.33	[2.81;3.11]	31	3	7	4	5	12
Popularity	2.76	1.24	[2.62;2.90]	23	2	0	4	6	11
Good grades	2.64	1.21	[2.50;2.77]	6	0	2	3	1	0

Note. *N* = 302. Beauty = Appreciation of beauty and excellence. Desirability = Rating on 5-point scale „1 = “not at all or little desirable”, 2 = “somewhat desirable”, 3 = “quite desirable”, 4 = “desirable”, 5 = “very desirable”). Importance = Selection of the five most important of the 30 qualities, in a second step putting them in a rank order.

Table 3

Partial Correlations of Character Strengths with Peer Acceptance, Number of Received Nominations as a Friend, and Number of Mutual Friends, Controlled for Influences of Age and Sex.

	Peer Acceptance (N = 339)	Received Friend Nominations (N = 339)	Mutual Friends (n = 324)
Creativity	.00	.09	-.06
Curiosity	-.03	-.05	-.11*
Open-mindedness	-.01	.02	.00
Love of learning	-.07	-.03	-.11*
Perspective	.19***	.24***	.15**
Bravery	-.01	.06	-.04
Perseverance	.04	.05	.03
Honesty	.07	.07	.10
Zest	.03	.10	.06
Love	.17**	.17**	.14*
Kindness	.13*	.19***	.12*
Social intelligence	.18***	.19***	.15**
Teamwork	.16**	.19***	.16**
Fairness	.06	-.02	.00
Leadership	.18***	.16**	.08
Forgiveness	.01	.11	.06
Humility	.13*	.09	.14*
Prudence	-.02	-.06	.03
Self-regulation	-.08	-.10	-.06
Beauty	.06	.09	-.05
Gratitude	.10	.14**	.10
Hope	.06	.07	.05
Humor	.21***	.25***	.18**
Spirituality	-.08	-.02	-.14*

Note. Beauty = Appreciation of beauty and excellence.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed),

Table 4

Parameter Estimates of Multilevel Modeling Analyses Examining the Actor (A) and Partner (P) Effects for Character Strengths on Friendship Quality (Controlling for Influences of Age and Sex)

	Friendship Satisfaction		Friendship Functions													
			Total		Companionship		Help		Intimacy		Rel. Alliance		Self-Validation		Emot. Security	
	A	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*	*A*	*P*
Creativity	.12	.02	.21**	.12	.16*	.13*	.16	.14	.15	.18*	.15*	.09	.35**	.01	.31**	.18
Curiosity	.16**	-.02	.26***	.07	.18**	-.05	.17*	.01	.28**	.04	.16*	-.06	.37***	.07	.37***	.08
Judgment	.03	-.02	.13	-.01	.07	-.07	.11	-.07	.06	.10	.02	-.04	.33**	-.07	.21*	.07
Love of l.	.13*	.01	.21**	.12	.13	.00	.11	.18*	.17	.19*	.22**	.00	.31**	.16	.31**	.19
Perspective	.19**	.13*	.30***	.17*	.24***	.13*	.22**	.19*	.29**	.27**	.22**	.02	.40***	.13	.43***	.28**
Bravery	.18**	.08	.32***	.14*	.23***	.11	.23**	.20*	.30***	.27**	.28***	.02	.39***	.06	.50***	.19*
Perseverance	.18**	.10	.28***	.11	.18**	.05	.19*	.18*	.28**	.20*	.13	.03	.42***	.06	.46***	.16
Honesty	.15*	.16**	.25***	.19*	.17*	.09	.26***	.21*	.21*	.30**	.15*	.08	.30**	.17	.42***	.27**
Zest	.18**	.07	.27***	.12	.25***	.08	.19*	.12	.25*	.19*	.25***	.05	.25*	.12	.40***	.15
Love	.16*	.17**	.21**	.25***	.13*	.16*	.24**	.26**	.23*	.35***	.16*	.13	.19	.27***	.29**	.36***
Kindness	.14*	.21**	.25**	.21**	.22***	.10	.20*	.24**	.17	.35***	.19*	.08	.33**	.18	.38***	.29**
Social intell.	.13*	.19**	.26***	.20**	.20**	.18**	.24**	.18*	.30***	.27**	.18*	.08	.30**	.19	.32***	.30**
Teamwork	.25***	.16**	.33***	.17*	.25***	.14*	.31***	.22**	.28**	.25**	.24***	.07	.36***	.15	.51***	.21*
Fairness	.08	.04	.16*	.03	.08	-.03	.16	.06	.08	.06	.12	.02	.27*	-.01	.26*	.09
Leadership	.16**	.08	.27***	.15*	.16*	.16*	.19*	.20*	.30***	.19*	.18*	.04	.33**	.11	.46***	.22*
Forgiveness	.13*	.07	.13	-.03	.12	-.01	.11	-.08	.02	-.07	.12	-.03	.16	-.02	.27*	.07
Humility	.16**	.08	.25***	.10	.21**	.06	.26**	.06	.20*	.16	.24***	.01	.29**	.12	.32**	.18
Prudence	-.01	-.03	.00	-.08	-.01	-.10	.00	-.11	-.09	-.03	-.01	-.04	.12	-.15	.03	-.04
Self-regulat.	.05	-.02	.06	-.08	.02	-.13*	.14	-.08	-.02	-.06	.03	-.06	.13	-.12	.07	-.05
Beauty	.05	.05	.18*	.12	.14*	.04	.18	.06	.16	.25*	.09	.09	.29*	.11	.24*	.17
Gratitude	.15**	.20***	.25***	.16*	.21**	.13*	.25**	.13	.18*	.23*	.24***	.10	.28**	.15	.33***	.23*
Hope	.12	.10	.19*	.09	.14*	.07	.12	.09	.13	.14	.27***	.01	.18	.11	.28**	.14
Humor	.18**	.08	.21**	.16*	.22***	.21**	.16	.10	.25**	.17	.15*	.14*	.18	.20	.30**	.17
Spirituality	-.01	.17**	.01	.13	.01	.15*	.03	.07	-.08	.18*	.02	.10	.03	.14	.06	.15

Note. $N = 136$ (68 dyads). A = Actor. P = Partner. Love of l. = Love of learning. Social intell. = Social intelligence. Self-regulat. = Self-regulation. Beauty = Appreciation of beauty and excellence. Companionship = Stimulating Companionship. Rel. = Reliable. Emot. = Emotional.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed),